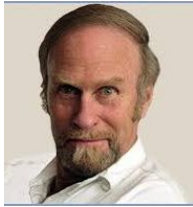


Bear Scare, Or, Is My Hair Standing Up For No Reason?



By Frosty Wooldridge

Adventure is not always comfortable; however, it's still adventure. It's not always safe, either. Whatever it is, it beats a couch, remote control and the inane, indolent TV any day of the week.

Our first canoe trip of the summer proved green trees, blushing flowers, small wild animals, waterfowl and the delights of paddling around islands, past geese, dragon flies and under blue skies. Not one mosquito landed on us! Yeah, right!

When we dipped the canoe into the autumn waters of Shadow Mountain Lake, the first hint of fall flashed before us in golden leaves sprinkling the forest landscape. For whatever reason, most of the boats of summer ceased their noise and speeding on our September weekend.

We threw our gear into the canoe after unloading it at the dock. We tossed in sleeping bags, tent, air mattresses, food, water and more camping gear. Sandi jumped into the front while I slid into the rear seat. Once again, peaceful, still waters curled past as we dug our paddles into the placid waters of that high mountain lake. All around, lodge pole pines swept upward along the mountain flanks creating a green theme. However, reddish brown needles from beetle blight sobered us with millions of dying trees.

It's distressing that one small insect only uses 1/millionth of the tree for food and cover, but kills 100 percent of the tree. Makes me wonder why nature developed such a deadly killing beetle machine.



(Sandi watching a gaggle of Canada Geese fly into the air in front of us.)

Nonetheless, as John Muir said, "This grand show is eternal. It is always sunrise somewhere; the dew is never all dried at once; a shower is forever falling, vapor is ever rising. Eternal sunrise, eternal sunset, eternal dawn and gloaming—on sea and continents and islands, each in its turn, as the round earth rolls."

And Sandi and I in our time, pressed the paddles of the eternal water craft, the canoe, which carried trappers, Indians, Hawaiians, South Americans and, really, most civilizations around the planet use canoes for travel on waterways.

We headed toward our favorite spot to watch the Canada geese and the magnificent pelicans on the west side of the lake. We pressed our canoe through three islands before us. As usual, majestic osprey flew past us or watched us go by from their perches in tall dead trees. Mallard ducks and diving ducks paddled around the islands as we swept past. A few squirrels, on their own private islands, chattered at us as we neared the shoreline. Before us, white, purple and yellow mountain daisies greeted us with their own beckoning beauty.

All of it slow, quiet and eternal! Can't quite describe the speed of a canoe, however, it's one that gives a sense of

spiritual serenity. Mental calm! Cellular rejuvenation! Jonathan Seagull said it provided the “perfect speed.” What is THAT speed? You don’t fly the speed of a jet, nor the slowness of a donkey, “The perfect speed—is being there.” In a canoe at 9,000 feet in the Rockies on a sunny day is “being there!”

What do you do in that canoe while paddling around the lake? For sure, you soak up the sky, the sun, the birds and the view. You fall back into your natural, spiritual speed. You talk about something, nothing and everything.

A big pelican walked across the water before taking flight to put on an air show for us. Several Canada geese flew in before skidding to a landing. Several turtles sunned themselves on dead logs sticking out of the water.

Near dusk, we paddled toward a private lagoon. We pushed through giant cat tails, through a narrow canal and into our own quiet, magical pond in the wilderness. Tall pines surrounded us.

We pitched camp, set up our chairs, table and fireplace. Sandi pulled the tent, sleeping bags and air mattresses out of the bags. We strapped on our miner’s lamps and warm sweaters. We stood on a small spit of a clearing that was 30 yards long and 10 yards back from the water. We pitched the tent near the water. We pulled the canoe onto the land near the tent. Sandi broke out the Mountain House Mexican vegetarian meal that tasted like a five-star New York restaurant. We cooked it up and served it with onion flavored soft bagels. “Oh my God, does this taste good,” I said.

Sandi agreed, “I love this food!”

“Look!” I pointed. “Honkers flying overhead in a chevron formation...just black silhouettes against a starlit sky.”

“Beautiful honey,” Sandi said.

Then gone! Quiet!

We ate our steaming dinners with a glass of wine in our new wilderness wine glasses.

Winston Abbott said, "Twilight is a time for sharing, a time for remembering, sharing the fragrance of the cooling earth, the shadows of the gathering dusk. Here our two worlds meet and pass, the frantic sounds of man grow dimmer as the light recedes, the unhurried rhythm of the other world swells in volume as the darkness deepens.

"It is not strange that discord has no place in the great symphony of sound, it is not strange that a sense of peace descends upon all living things as the things of substance lose their line and form in the softness of the dark."

The night air cooled. While sipping on freshly prepared hot chocolates, we looked up at the night sky to see the Big Dipper, North Star, Little Dipper, Orion and many other magical constellations. Nothing like sitting up at night to see the universe as the ceiling over your head! It allows you to see forever.

Sandi rolled over on the big fat mattress Gary gave us many years ago. It sleeps like a Serta Heavenly bed! "Night sweetie," she said.

"Sleep tight," I said.

As usual, I dropped off to sleep like a rock. Around 2:00 AM, I heard Sandi unzip the tent to take a bathroom break which is her usual modus operandi. Moments later, I heard her unzip the tent and crawl back into her sleeping bag. I dropped off to sleep heaven.

"Harumph! Harumph!" a BIG sound from a BIG animal sounded not far from the tent.

I awoke with a rush of adrenaline that raced through my body

like the cars at the Indy 500. Fear plowed through my mind like Hurricane Katrina. Whatever it was, it was BIG! I hadn't had that kind of fear since I faced a grizzly in Alaska in the 70s.

"Honey," Sandi whispered.

"Oh my God, it sounds like a bear," I said.

"Where's the bear spray?" Sandi asked with her heart pounding out of her chest. She was scared to death. I wasn't too far behind her in my own fear.

"It's in the plastic box in the vestibule," I whispered. "I forgot to put it in the loft in the tent...not smart."

"Get it," she said.

"Harumph! Harumph!" the sound wasn't 20 feet away and coming closer.

I unzipped the tent. Grabbed my miner's lamp! Placed it on my head! Grabbed the plastic box! Grabbed the bear spray! Shoved my feet into my boots! Didn't want to face a damned 350 pound black bear in my stocking feet!

"What are you going to do?" Sandi asked.

"I'm going to face the beast and spray him with a load of this stuff," I said. "If we're going to die, we might as well give him a fight. No sense letting him maul us in the tent."

I unzipped the nylon door, turned on my light, stood up and looked immediately in 360 degrees of direction pointing the bear spray. Not 30 yards away, in the brush, along the lakeside, two big eyes reflected my miner's lamp. He crashed through the brush making a lot of sound breaking off branches of small trees.

"Holy mackerel!" I said to Sandi. "It's big!"

"What is it?" she said.

"I can't tell," I said. "It's moving away probably 100 feet and going east from here."

Soon, I couldn't see its eyes as it vanished into the night.

"I think it's gone," I said as I stepped back into the tent.

"My heart is pounding out of my chest," Sandi said with fear in her voice. "I first heard it when I took my potty break. I raced back into the tent. I didn't want to wake you up because I didn't know what to do."

"As soon as I heard that first sound," I said, "that startled me out of a sound sleep. It's probably just a black bear making his night rounds. I think we're okay now because he's headed east away from us. Let's hit the sack."

"I'm too scared to sleep," Sandi said.

"Okay," I said, "stay up until you fall to sleep."

I dozed off. Suddenly, at 3:00 AM, that same "Harumph, Harumph" sound startled me out of my sleep. This time, the breaking of branches added to the fear I felt. The damned thing got closer and closer and seemed to be rattling a lot of tin cans while it busted through the underbrush and trees.

"Honey, it's coming back," Sandi said, clutching my arm. "What are you going to do?"

"You get your shoes on and prepare to run like hell," I said. "I'll take the bear spray and fight him off as best I can. If he gets me, at least you'll be safe. Head toward the lights of some cabin near the lake."

I unzipped the tent and about peed my pants I was so scared. I stood up and looked in the direction of the sound. My miner's lamp lit up the bushes and trees and, there, not 60 feet away,

two big eyes headed right toward me without stopping.

"Good God, it's coming right at us," I said. "Get your shoes and get ready to run if it attacks."

I looked at it! It looked at me! Two big eyes reflecting my miner's lamp! I stood there in the wilderness with my little can of bear spray and wondering if I was going to live through the night. All my years in the wilderness, and shit, a bear was about to eat me for a late-night snack. Damn! Where's my Barker Lounger and remote? Where's my safe bedroom in suburbia? Why didn't we order a motel?

In it came, steadily, "Harumph, Harumph, Harumph" as it broke down more branches and plowed through bushes. As it got closer, it was less than 40 feet away when it broke through the clearing. It loomed bigger and bigger, scarier and scarier until my light shined not only on its eyes, but its whole body came into view, all 1,500 pounds of its body! Because I was expecting a God-awful monster of a bear, my eyes couldn't believe what it was until my mind switched gears to the sight before me—a magnificent bull moose with a five-foot-wide rack on his head.

"Oh my God," I yelled to Sandi. "It's a vegetarian...we're saved!"

"What?" she cried out. "It's a what...a vegetarian? What are you talking about?"

"It's a bull moose," I said. "He's a vegetarian. He won't eat us."

The big guy walked right by the tent not 15 feet away. He looked at me, I looked at him, and he kept on walking until he vanished into the darkness.

"Oh my God," I said. "What a magnificent beast! Sure as heck happy it wasn't a bear. Let's go to sleep."

"Honey, tell me again why we love camping," Sandi said. "I'm scared to death."

We fell back to sleep, or at least, I fell asleep while Sandi clutched at my sleeping bag and squirmed in closer than ever before.

Next morning, ducks flew overhead, geese honked across the water, mist rose from the lagoon where we had camped. I opened up the fly to see the steam rolling in circles off the water. A golden aspen bloomed across the way.

"Ah, great to be alive," I said. "Let's fix breakfast."

We cooked oatmeal, prepared hot chocolate and sliced a few bananas for condiments. Lovely breakfast watching the steam rise off the lake! A cacophony of squirrels, osprey, crow, robins, geese and ducks made for an amazing breakfast full of wilderness.

That day, the sun rose high in the sky. We paddled to our hearts' content around the beautiful waters of Shadow Mountain Lake. Later, we headed the bow of our canoe toward the eastern shore. Sandi wanted to hike the east side of the lake so we tied up and took a four mile hike along the magic of the wilderness.

Later, as the day faded, we paddled southward toward our take-out. Not a boat on the lake! Quiet! Serene! Lovely! What a gift for us to sail away on placid waters teaming with birds, fish and vegetarian wildlife! In our memories—delicious eating by starlight, night sounds, birds, a vegetarian moose on his night rounds and the very special joy we shared with the coming of autumn as we paddled our ancient craft upon the magic of a high mountain lake.

"The summer—no sweeter than ever;
The sunshiny woods all athrill;
The grayling aleap in the river;

The bighorn asleep on the hill.

It's the great, big broad land way up yonder,
It's the forests where silence has lease;
It's the beauty that thrills me with wonder;
It's the stillness that fills me with peace."

The strong life that never knows harness;
The wilds where the caribou call;
The freshness, the freedom, the farness—
Oh God! How I'm stuck on it all. (Robert Service)

Thank you for joining us on our grand adventures this summer.

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